

Statement of Mr. Jay Jackson,
National Transportation Safety Board's
Public Forum on Motorcycle Safety
September 12-13, 2006

Mr. Jay Jackson has been a motorcycling enthusiast since the early 1970s. He became involved with motorcycle safety and awareness in the early 1980s. Jay's involvement in rider education started in 1985. He obtained certification as a motorcycle safety instructor in 1986 and as a chief instructor in 2000. He is also active in motorcycle licensing, off-road (OHV) education and numerous motorist awareness campaigns. His organization is responsible for motorcycle license examinations and is the primary contractor for rider education in their state.

Jay is the Executive Director for ABATE of Indiana and also serves as the State Director of their motorcycle safety division having held numerous offices and titles within ABATE over the last 25 years. Jay is also the Director of Motorcycle Safety for the Washington, D.C. based Motorcycle Rider's Foundation. Additionally, he sits on the Advisory Committee for the Indiana Department of Education's Motorcycle Operator Safety and Education Program and has participated in countless motorcycle safety and awareness forums, panels and working groups.

While we continue to search, there is no silver bullet or magic wand that will completely address the safety of motorcycle operators or passengers. There are a number of components in the overall equation for motorcycle safety. They include, but are not necessarily limited to: roadway design, vehicle design, operator impairment, awareness and rider education. Those that the riding community are most vulnerable to, and should be able to have the most influence on, seem to be training, awareness and impairment.

We want to be certain that the motorcyclist has basic skills and the ability to control their machine so as not to "fall down". Possessing experience or strategies that provide the savvy to predict and avoid a crash can be the key to survival on the street.

Making other users aware of motorcyclists' presence on the road and encouraging them to look for motorcycles in traffic, can reduce the likelihood of inattentive motorists violating the right of way of a motorcyclist.

In as much as alcohol is still over-represented in motorcycle crashes, all motor vehicle operators must be free of impairments as they interact with others.

Each of these measures are proactive in that they can be addressed prior to a crash and thereby avoid the incident altogether. In the late 1970s, ABATE of Indiana recognized a need to become actively involved in these proactive steps to preserve motorcycling as a means of transportation, as well as a lifestyle, while making Hoosier highways safer for everyone. Admittedly, in the beginning there were some challenges and a bit of confusion created by a “rights group” getting into safety. Fortunately, we had some dedicated people on both sides that were able to keep focus of our common causes and not get mired down in our differences. We accepted the understanding that on some issues we would agree to disagree, yet stay unified on reducing motorcycle accidents, injuries and fatalities.

For the purpose of this panel we will concentrate on the training and licensing aspects.

While there may be differing theories, rider education does work. I’ve experienced it first hand and heard hundreds of accounts from former rider course students stating “I wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for this course”. The Hurt Report indicated that about 90% of accident involved riders were self taught. Even today we find that unlicensed or improperly licensed riders are over-represented in crashes. In the absence of formal rider education, the school of hard knocks was the only way to learn some costly and painful lessons. A structured and controlled class allows a rider, or prospective rider, the opportunity to start with a simple skill and develop that before being forced to deal with other tasks outside the comfort level of a novice. Establishing a sequence so that the most fundamental skills are achieved first is critical. Through repetitive practice, these skills are enhanced and the student gains confidence and enough comfort level to move to the next set of skills.

We congratulate graduates and successful skills examination applicants on their accomplishments and tell them that they should be proud. However, we caution them that what they have really done is demonstrated that they have met the minimum requirements necessary to pass the course or test. While that should not be minimized as it is certainly a big first step toward becoming a responsible and proficient motorcyclist, it remains up to them, as an individual, to apply and continue to practice and develop what they have learned. Just like with any training, regardless of how thorough or intense, it isn’t over at the end of class, it’s only beginning. When a physician completes class, there are still internships, residency programs and, for many, fellowships. Motorcycling is much the same in that it’s a dynamic, ever-evolving process where the learning never ends.

While the concept of advanced, experienced or other additional offerings is a good one, it seems that many people feel that once they have passed a course or received their license or endorsement, they are good to go. Enrollment in classes for experienced riders has always been a bit sluggish. One theory is that they “know it all” or don’t need a class. We hear things like “I’ve been ridin’ for 20 years, what are you gonna teach me?” Keeping in mind that if you’ve been doing something improperly for 20 years, it doesn’t necessarily make you “experienced”. Another thought is that some of these “accomplished” riders realize that they may not be as good as they claim and they fear being “shown up”.

Either way, we often get only one shot at “training” and once people get their license or endorsement we don’t see them again.

There is no real evidence that a tiered or graduated system of motorcycle licensing, where a rider must demonstrate competency on one size machine for a period of time before being allowed to move up to a larger unit, actually reduces crashes. However, it would mean that if beginning riders were to crash, it would be on smaller, perhaps slower, vehicles. This is not widely viewed as a solution.

Historically, “bikers” have been characterized as being free spirited and perhaps even rebellious. This personality tends to make them view regulatory acts, and functions termed mandatory as distasteful. Peer pressure, and initiatives from within the motorcycling culture, seems to be more successful at affecting attitudes than bureaucratic direction. “It won’t happen to me” is a common response to public information and education campaigns geared toward motorcycle safety. This is especially true of impairment messages. However, the brotherhood of a one on one intervention can have a significant impact.

Millions have taken advantage of the benefits of receiving training and being properly licensed. The legal, financial, social and physical incentives and or penalties have motivated many. It appears that what most people want is ready access to a program that is quick, affordable, provides results and is enjoyable.

Striking a balance between how much training is enough, how much time people will invest and how we deliver the training is a challenge. The best product doesn’t do any good if there is no access to it. Conversely, broad distribution of an inferior or substandard product may have a negative impact, especially if it creates doubt or questions the effectiveness of rider education in general. While a perfect solution is unlikely, we must draw from the vast knowledge and experience of the motorcycle safety professionals to reach compromises without compromising the integrity, credibility, success and future of rider education. Though we may not have all the answers, at least we are identifying the questions.